

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE CARPENTARIAN GRASSWREN

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In late July 1982 on the direction of John McKean I visited the sandstone escarpment near Borroloola, Northern Territory, to try and locate the little known and apparently rare Carpentarian Grasswren *Amytornis dorotheae*. After a difficult search of eight days quite satisfactory looks were obtained. In the beginning of September 1982, with the aim of obtaining the first ever photographs of the species, I spent two days backpacking food, water, camping gear and photographic equipment into the area. It was during this time, from mid-September through mid-October, 1982 that most of the following behavioural observations were made.

My observation post was on the top of a pile of sandstone boulders approximately 12 metres above the surrounding boulder and spinifex gullies. I usually took my position just after dawn as light became strong enough to distinguish colour. The birds in the group I observed usually did not appear in the area until about 09:00. There were four individuals and there was a 'leader' who took the front position as they travelled across flat or open ground.

The incredibly fast bouncing hop that propelled the birds as they covered open areas was most impressive. The only time I observed them to fly voluntarily was to cover the space where a steep and deep chasm separated them from what was apparently a more desirable feeding area. They took wing one after the other to cross this chasm. While feeding the birds would search rock crevices and leaf and twig litter for insects and probably seeds (Schodde, 1982 describes the diet of the species as 'both insects and seeds') like a domestic hen and turn over leaves by picking them up in the bill and moving the covering out of the way. The only identifiable food items I have seen them take are spiders and small beetles.

One morning as I watched the party move leisurely through an area of small boulders surrounded by tall spinifex, a Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus* swooped low over the last bird in line causing the entire party to dive into the spinifex and disappear. The goshawk landed on a rocky promontory five to eight metres above where the party had taken refuge, and waited. After apparently seeing movement the goshawk dived from her perch, talons extended, towards the clump of spinifex. I sprang from my place waving my arms and distracted the goshawk so that she missed her target and flew away with talons empty.

About four and a half minutes passed before the 'leader' cautiously emerged from hiding and with great care began to search the area for signs of the goshawk. Without leaving overhead cover the bird spent almost another five minutes satisfying itself that the danger of attack had passed before calling to the hidden members of the party who promptly emerged and resumed normal activity.

On 29 September 1984 Judy Whitaker and her mother, who was visiting from Tasmania, located a nest with two eggs. The nest occupied the upper portion of a spinifex plant about 750 mm. tall. It was globular and 'finch-like', made of spinifex stems and lined with softer fibres. An entrance hole of approximately 50 mm. diameter led to the nest chamber and though some uncertainty exists it was thought that this hole faced almost due north. Weekly observations were made and on 14 October it was noted that one of the eggs had hatched. On that day Kath Shurcliff and I observed the nest from a distance of at least 100 metres for almost one and a half hours without seeing a visit from either parent. Kath then approached the nest and saw one bird quit the area. She thought that bird to be the male. The last visit was on 20th October, when the nest was found to be empty except for one unhatched egg. This egg and the nest were deposited with the Northern Territory Museum, Darwin.

Acknowledgements

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References

SCHODDE, R. 1982. *The Fairy Wrens. A Monograph of the Maluridae.* Landsdowne: Melbourne.